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Local Flavors: An Exploration of Food Writing in the Shenandoah Valley

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by Allison Michelli

Spring 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication,
James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of
Arts.

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Dedication Page

An appreciation and enjoyment of food starts at home, in the kitchen and around the dinner table with family. I would like to dedicate this project to my parents, Wayne and Tammy Michelli, and my sister Brittany Breisch. Thank you for all the dinner-table chats, rib-sticking meals, and heartfelt memories made at mealtime. I would also like to dedicate this project to Garin Pappas. Thank you for supporting me every step of the way throughout this project and always being there to keep me sane. I love you all!

Table of Contents

Preface	4
Acknowledgements.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Genre’s Contribution to Rhetorical Theory.....	9
Food Culture of the Shenandoah Valley	10
Blog Format and Design.....	14
Blog Photography	20
Project Reflection.....	25
Works Cited	28

Preface

One of my favorite quotations by Jeannette Ferrary, a food writer, photographer, and author. It comes from an article she helped co-author titled “How to Become a Great Food Writer: The Big Secret.” She states,

You have to write what you love. What are you interested in? What fascinates you?

It’s a good idea to become obsessed with whatever it is so you can happily lose yourself in your subject and maybe drive everyone around you crazy with your enthusiasm. When you’re writing what you care about, it shows. There’s an energy and vibrancy and sensuousness to your work that you can’t fake. It will sound like you and nobody else, which makes it valuable and unique.

While researching writing jobs, I came upon this quotation, and it stood out to me because it had never realistically occurred to me that in order to be a good writer, I would need to focus on one particular subject or genre. From that moment of realization, I started to critically reevaluate what I enjoyed putting down on paper.

Despite all the critical essays, research papers, and rhetorical analyses I have completed throughout my education, it never feels real to me that my purpose for writing could potentially create change. There is something so raw and visceral about sending a piece of writing out into the real world, whether it is to be published or shared at an open mic night, that traditional classroom writing cannot capture. Being able to craft an active dialogue with an audience and a growing relationship with the text is hard to develop with a traditional essay.

I came to find that the subjects and genres that interested me the most were ones that embodied a deeper connection with not just my audience, but the very fabric of the culture they situated themselves in; food writing is an example of a genre that does just that. So when it came

time to design my project I knew I had to design it around the skills I learned in the WRTC program and food writing.

To prepare myself for the task of creating a food blog and delving deeper into the genre of food writing, I took an internship in the summer of 2014 with [*Northern Virginia Magazine*](#). At my internship, I worked under the Dining Editor and Restaurant Critic Stefanie Gans. My main responsibilities included writing print articles and blog posts for the magazine's food blog [*Gut Check*](#) and updating a list of upcoming and newly opened restaurants in the Northern Virginia region. This internship experience was my first foray into the food-writing genre and the blogosphere. My writing style developed throughout the summer, becoming more concise and impactful. I learned the ins and outs of how to be a professional food writer from the initial pitch of a story to the final draft.

The internship experience helped grow my skills as a writer and an editor by breaking me out of the traditional academic model of writing. The skills I learned helped guide my approach to the honors senior thesis project and the overall design of my food blog. Some of the things I learned from my internship that I applied to my project include the importance of a social media presence, food photography, editing blog posts, and writing a restaurant review. Ultimately, I was able to adapt what I had learned to create a body of work reflected in this project that engages a specific genre, incorporates web-based media, and celebrates a rich heritage of food culture in the Shenandoah Valley.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank Karen McDonnell, WRTC Instructor for her endless support and guidance throughout the past three semesters. I greatly value the honesty and firm work ethic that you instilled in me during the process of creating this project. I would also like to thank Kevin Jefferson, WRTC Instructor and Daisy Breneman, Justice Studies Academic Advisor for agreeing to serve as readers on my committee. Your feedback and encouragement were invaluable. Finally, I would like to thank the School of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication and the Honors Program for allowing me to complete an independent project that creatively explored a topic of personal interest and helped develop my skills as an editor and a writer.

Introduction

“I truly feel that food is a celebration of life. It's the most important, most valuable gift that God gave humans.”

– Jeff Henderson, Award-winning chef and bestselling author

Food holds an intrinsic fascination for human beings. Not only do we rely on it biologically for nourishment, but we also identify with it culturally. This celebration of different types of food allows people to seek familiarity in a place and belonging in a community.

When I was growing up, my dad traveled extensively for work, and the first thing he wanted when he landed back in the States was a home-cooked meal. Raised in the South on classic comfort foods, he never fails to remind my mother when she forgets to make gravy and insists that a meal is never complete without red meat or fried chicken. My father's solidarity with southern comfort food is only one example of thousands of possible identifications. Food is a personal and comforting experience. It has the power to bring people together, divide cultures, religions, and nations, heal break-up wounds, and rekindle memories from Thanksgivings and Christmases past.

Just as food creates a community, so does food blogging. According to “Changing Tastes in Food Media,” food blogging is “a subculture, and a community of interest made up of fans and enthusiasts.” Regardless of the medium, food embodies community and who we are as individuals.

When weblogs came about in the 1990s, there was very little understanding of how they would be used and what they would grow to become. Fast-forward 20 years and the word weblog has been shortened to blog, and blogging has become a large part of the information superhighway. In 2013 there were estimated to be over 152 million blogs on the internet (How Many Blogs Are on the Internet). Free blogging sites like WordPress, Wix, Weebly, Blogger, and Tumblr make creating a blog as simple as choosing a pre-made template. As a result of the blogosphere's sweeping

popularity and convenient accessibility, new genres of blogs have grown out of the traditional form. Food blogs in particular are an emerging subgenre of the blog.

Go online and Google “food blogs.” In 0.35 seconds, 1.94 million results are served up straight to your desktop. With one click, you can visit hundreds of kitchens and restaurants and experience flavorful cuisine from all over the world. The photos are tantalizing and hunger inducing, while the narratives are highly entertaining and oftentimes candid with personal details. You can’t help but indulge in the playful nature of food blogs and their mouth-watering narratives. It is evident from the number of food blogs available for consumption on the Internet that a new genre may be emerging from the blogosphere.

In the past 15 years, food blogs have changed the way we experience food. Eating is no longer just a necessity, but a moment in time that deserves to be captured, shared on social media, and written about at length. Food is a celebration of culture and a place marker in time. By recreating the recipes of food bloggers and indulging in their oftentimes candid and sassy commentary, readers evolve from incurious observers to active participants within the cultural landscape.

Through their use of sensory details, food blogs have an overwhelming effect on human perception and emotions. Think back to your favorite meal that mom makes you whenever you come home to visit. A food blogger has the ability to capture the feelings of that moment and offer them to a global audience. Food blogs offer a way of persuading and attracting readers through rhetorical use of pathos. They illustrate just how powerful emotions and memories can be in successfully delivering a message to a chosen audience.

Genre's Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

Food blogs have achieved the status of an emerging genre by taking bits of the original blog form and also creating new standards and expectations to fit their specific purpose and audience. These are not just some run-of-the-mill mommy blogs exploiting grandma's famous butterscotch fudge recipe. Food blogs are creating a larger conversation about the food we eat and how we eat it. Through their use of strategic branding, social media outreach, and consistent formatting, food blogs are redefining food for a new generation. Combined with vivid photography, personal details, fresh commentary, and creative approaches to recipes, the food blog has been able to develop into a unique genre.

There is also evidence that the subgenre of food blogs is beginning to fracture into sub-subgenres. Food blogs on the web nowadays are specializing in everything from [cake pops](#), to [beer](#), to [culinary travel](#). This division within the subgenre illustrates that there is a difference now between a food blog and a blog about food.

As a result of my research, I have found signs that indicate people are beginning to think more rigorously and critically about not only the food they are eating, but what a "good life" entails. The past ten years have shown evidence of a food revolution resulting in people being less concerned about how fast they get their food and more about the wholesome quality of it. Food blogs have the ability to package this ideal life into posts about home-cooked meals and natural living. Just like 20 years ago when weblogs were a new technology ripe with possibility, it will be interesting to see where the age-old blog will be 20 years from now. Until then, readers will continue to hungrily read on as bloggers serve them the recipes and lifestyle that they crave.

Food Culture of the Shenandoah Valley

The Shenandoah Valley has a rich agricultural history and food culture going back to the early 19th century. This history and culture has stood the test of time, providing a firm foundation for unique farm-to-table restaurants, agritourism, wineries, and breweries to thrive in the present day area. Because of this rich history and culture, I chose to focus my food blog, [*The Valley Eats*](#), on this geographic area.

During the Civil War (1861-1865) the Shenandoah Valley was known as “The Breadbasket of the Confederacy.” The Shenandoah Valley gained this nickname because of its strategic location for the Confederacy and its bountiful supply of agricultural goods. The Union military did not ignore the Confederacy’s stronghold in the valley. In order to thwart their military efforts and starve them out, “In the summer and fall of 1864, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant ordered his subordinate commanders Gen. David Hunter and then Gen. Philip H. Sheridan to destroy all provisions and livestock [in the Shenandoah Valley] not needed for the subsistence of troops under their command” (Koons). After ravaging the area, General Sheridan reported back to his superiors that

The whole country from the Blue Ridge to the North Mountain has been made untenable for a rebel army. I have destroyed over two thousand barns filled with wheat, hay, and farming implements, and over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat, have driven in front of this army over four thousand head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops over three thousand sheep. (Koons)

After this showing of brute force from the Union military, the people of the valley were left practically homeless, like refugees. It would take nearly two decades after the Civil War to rebuild the previous agricultural splendor of the antebellum era (Koons).

The post-Civil War years offered a challenge to farmers because of the disruption that the troops made to the area. By 1870, the rate of production of field crops and types of livestock were still hovering below the pre-war levels: “Production of corn had fallen fifty-two percent, rye thirty-five percent, and hay eleven percent. The number of horses had decreased fifteen percent; the number of milk cows in the region had fallen six percent and beef cattle twenty-four percent; the numbers of sheep were down thirty percent and swine forty-six percent” (Koons). The impact of the war also had a detrimental impact on the value of the land in the area; for example “in 1870, the [Shenandoah Valley] farms contained 34,000 fewer improved acres than they had in 1860” (Koons). The agricultural economy did not recover fully until the 1880s.

In the present day Shenandoah Valley, there is a large agritourism and farm-to-table presence specifically in the form of Community Supported Agriculture programs (CSA), wineries and breweries, and “pick your own” farms. Just like back in the 19th century, the Shenandoah Valley has maintained its’ agricultural notoriety. Currently, the Shenandoah Valley is home to four of the top five agricultural producing counties in the Commonwealth of Virginia: Rockingham, Augusta, Page, and Shenandoah counties ("Agriculture in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley").

Farm-to-table eating has inherently always been a tradition of the Shenandoah Valley. Nowadays, most people do not have the time to cultivate their own crops, so farmers’ markets are an accessible way for residents of the area to educate themselves about where their food comes from and also network with local farmers and food artisans to enhance community outreach. There are currently eight farmers’ markets located throughout the valley in Hot Springs (Bath County), Buena Vista, Downtown Harrisonburg, Monterey (Highland County), Luray (Page County), Lexington (Rockbridge), Staunton, and Waynesboro. Many of the markets either currently or have in the past supported SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program). Accepting government assistance

demonstrates that farmers' markets are placing themselves at the center of the community and creating a safe place of inclusivity and education. Another similar attraction for foodies in the valley is the Friendly City Food Co-op in Downtown Harrisonburg. The Co-op is a unique concept in that it combines what is appealing about a weekly farmers market with the convenience of a modern supermarket. Farm-to-table dining is another outgrowth of the farmers' market appeal that bridges the gap between diners and locally raised food.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) means, "a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm..." (Community Supported Agriculture). There are four CSA programs located around the Harrisonburg area: Glen Eco Farm, Season's Bounty Farm & CSA, Radical Roots Community Farm, and Muddy Creek Farmstand (Purcell). The appeal of CSA programs in general is that they "help to preserve family farms and earth-friendly agriculture by allowing farmers to skip the wholesalers, shippers, processors, and retailers who usually capture much of the food buyer's dollar" (Purcell). The way that these programs work is that participants invest in a share of the CSA by paying a fee at the beginning of the growing season. During the harvest, subscribers will subsequently receive a box each week consisting of various produce items grown on the farm.

Every fall when the leaves are ablaze with golden hues of yellow and orange and fiery red, agritourism is put on display in the Shenandoah Valley in the form of pick-your-own apple and pumpkin farms. Agritourism is defined by the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center as "the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation to enjoy, be educated or be involved in activities." [Showalter's Orchard and Greenhouse](#) in Timberville specializes in apple and pumpkin picking and is a prime example of agritourism in its purest form.

Every year pick-your-own farms bring in visitors from outside the valley to explore the plentiful natural bounty of the area.

The Shenandoah Wine Trail is famous for its number and variety of vineyards. The trail encompasses 20 regional wineries that span the length of the valley. The mountainous landscape, temperate climate, and granite-based soil make the Shenandoah Valley an optimal place for growing grapes (The Land of Virginia). Aside from the grape, though, Harrisonburg has also made a name for itself on the craft beer circuit. The Annual Rocktown Beer and Music Festival draws thousands of people to Harrisonburg, and the attention this little town is garnering for its hops and barley is helping to expand the selection of cold brews available on the market. After the opening of Brothers Craft Brewing formerly named Three Brothers Brewing Company, Harrisonburg was subsequently given the title of the best beer town by BlueRidgeOutdoors.com in 2013 (Daddio). Following behind this accolade was the opening of Three Notch'd Brewing Company and coming this spring, the addition of Pale Fire Brewing Company. Aside from breweries, there is also a market of specialty beer shops like the Midtowne Market and the Midtowne Bottle Shop.

The Shenandoah Valley has always been a thriving area for local agriculture. In present day, this trend has continued in the form of Community Supported Agriculture programs, Farmers Markets, a vibrant agritourism industry, and a developing reputation for quality wines and craft brews. These various components of the Shenandoah Valley's present-day food culture pay homage to its agricultural roots of the past and create convenient accessibility to locally grown produce for both residents of and visitors to the Blue Ridge.

Blog Design and Format

Weebly is a web-hosting platform that allows its users to choose from a set of customizable templates to design their personal website, portfolio, or blog. Despite the array of other web-hosting platforms on the market, like Wix and WordPress, I chose Weebly in particular because of its user-friendly interface and capabilities. I have a limited knowledge of HTML code so for this project I did not feel comfortable choosing a web-hosting platform, like WordPress, that includes coding as a primary component of the design features. Weebly incorporates a drag-and-drop feature that allows the user to place widgets and content right onto the page or within the post. I have used Wix in the past for other projects and its interface (unlike Weebly's) is clunky and does not allow the template to be customized with such ease. Overall Weebly's interface and features made for a streamlined design experience.

The template I chose to work with was called "Highlighter" (see Figure 1). Weebly describes this template as bold, fun, minimalist, and simple. Specifically, this template is considered a journal for writers and journalists. I initially did not start out with this template because I was interested in experimenting with a slew of other templates in order to find the look I desired for the blog. The "Highlighter" template creates a streamlined reading experience and calls upon a pink highlighter color to draw attention to bolded or hyperlinked phrases.

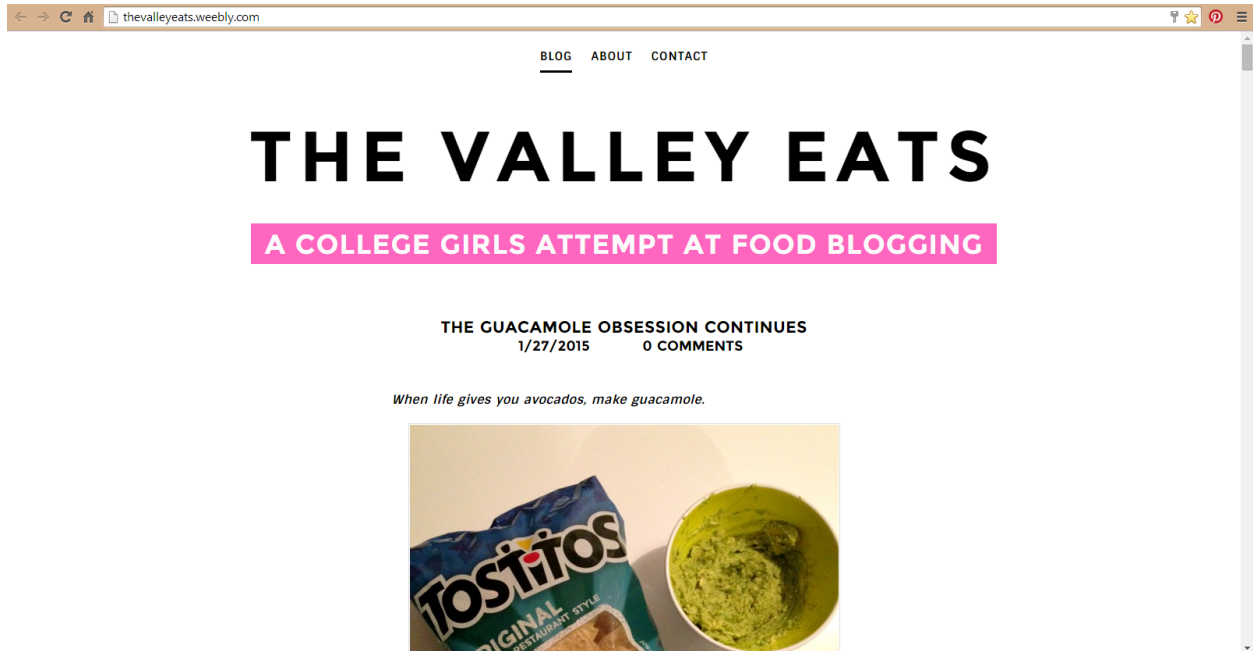


Figure 1

[*The Valley Eats*](#) Homepage

An About Me page is oftentimes neglected or overlooked when designing a website. It is an integral part to the design of a successfully functioning website because “This single page speaks about who you are, what you do and why this website” (Agrawal). In my writing classes, we talk a lot about the purpose behind a particular written work or digital design, and the About Page is where that purpose is made clear to readers. The About Me page on the *The Valley Eats* features my headshot and a paragraph stating:

Welcome to The Valley Eats!

My name is Allison. I'm a senior Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication major at James Madison University, located in the gorgeous Shenandoah Valley. "The Valley Eats" is not just a blog but a personal journey to celebrate, share and honor the rich food and wine culture of the region. From the northern tip of Harpers Ferry, W.V., stretching southward toward Roanoke, the

Shenandoah Valley shares a story with visitors that starts at the farm and ends at the kitchen table. By reaching out and talking to local chefs, farmers and the occasional foodie, I have come to learn that the Valley is home to more than just apples and poultry. So join me as we uncover the epicurean delights of the Shenandoah Valley.

There is a large misconception that About Me pages need to be packed with personal info on details readers don't necessarily need to know. Personal details about a blogger's favorite sports team or lipstick color has the possibly to distract the readers and turn them off from wanting to discover more about the blog. *ShoutMeLoud*, a blog about how to create a successful business with a blog, recommends that "An ideal 'About Me' page should have something about you, not your personal stuff that you like...." In addition to an About Me page, a contact page is also helpful to have as a part of the web design, in order to give the readers a way to directly communicate with the writer.

A contact page serves as a point of interaction between the writer of the blog and their readers. Just as comments at the bottom of a blog post can facilitate interaction between readers, the contact page is going to be a source for the writer to interact directly with their readers. Visible Logic Inc. suggests in their article "8 Tips for a Better Contact Us Page on Your Web Site" to include a contact form. Many contact pages only provide a hyperlinked email address that will subsequently launch an external email program. Other times the designer will forget to hyperlink the email address, forcing someone to copy and paste the email address. Contact forms are the most foolproof way of making contact accessible for a diverse array of audiences, and they also serve as a buffer between the writer and the public. For example, the article explains that if someone prefers using a public computer or accesses their email using a web-based program, they have more flexibility with a contact form than with a traditional hyperlinked or copy/paste email address.

Another perk of using a contact form is that people won't be able to save the blog's email to use in malicious ways. This protects the privacy and reputation of the blogger. After taking into account the skeletal design of the blog, I then refocused my efforts on deciding on the type of content that the blog would feature.

Diversifying the array of blog posts I wrote gave the blog more of an interesting appeal. One of this project's objectives was experimenting with different forms of food writing. The various blog posts that I wrote are divided into three distinct categories depending on their individual content:

Restaurant Reviews: These posts are full-length reviews on restaurants in the Shenandoah Valley and other regions of Virginia. The purpose of these posts was to highlight the restaurant's food and drink menus, the quality of service provided to the diner, the unique character of the dining establishment, and the overall ambiance of the restaurant. It was important to me that my readers had an honest and complete view of the restaurant. This was achieved through personal, firsthand experience along with photographic documentation (see Figure 2 for example).

Recipe Tutorials: Local ingredients in the Shenandoah Valley are abundant and thriving. Local farmers' markets, CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture), and Food Co-ops ensure a rich supply of local food is available for citizens to reap. Recipe tutorials highlight recipes and local ingredients that that can be found in and around the Shenandoah Valley. Recipe tutorials take the traditional form of a recipe whether it is in a cookbook, scrawled on a recipe card, or torn out of a magazine and fleshes it out for the reader to experience step-by-step in their own time. The recipe tutorials on my blog are photographed step-by-step and explained in written instructions so viewers of the blog can easily access the recipe through both written and visual mediums (see Figure 3 for example).

Foodie Finds: Foodie Finds are posts about food, wine, and cooking/food-related information that I found to be particularly unique or interesting. These blog posts are a combination of review and narrative pieces (See Figure 4 for example).

Blog posts appear on the homepage in reverse chronological order. This means that when a reader first logs on to the blog, they will see the most recent blog post first. I played around with the overall design of the blog posts. When I first started the blog, I had yet to discover the “read more button.” This button was helpful to use with particularly longer blog posts to help entice readers and subsequently draw them into reading more of the article. Typically I would start out the post with a lead phrase or paragraph and a photo. The lead would simply introduce the topic of the blog post and draw the reader in. On more text-heavy blog entries, I would intersperse the photos with text, commenting on the picture in order to give it more context and to connect it to the topic of the post.

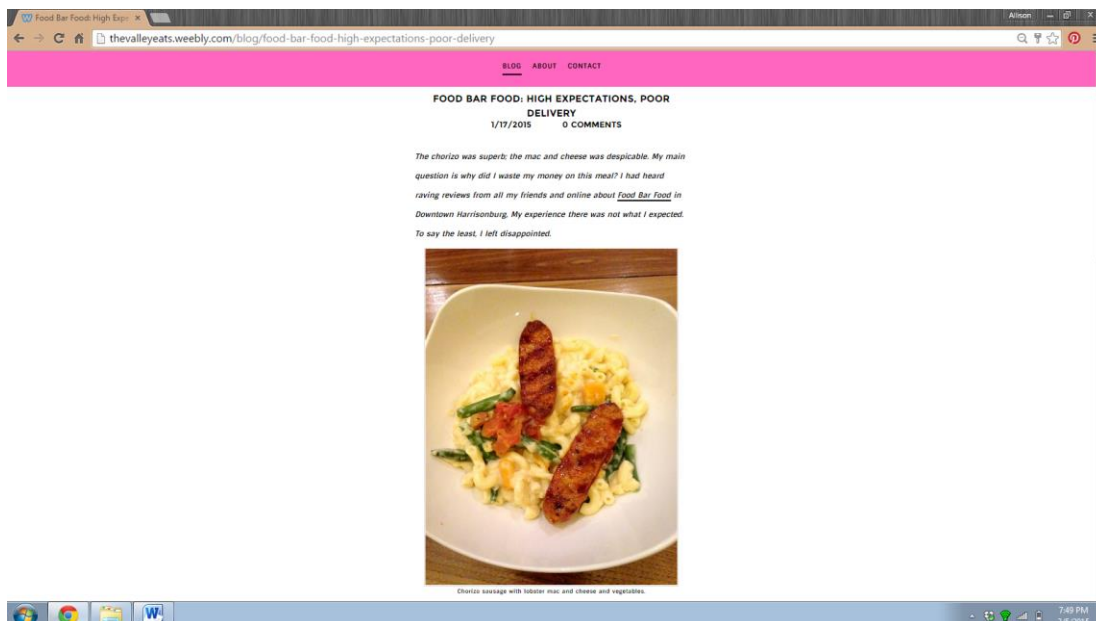


Figure 2

A restaurant and dish [review](#) of Food Bar Food.

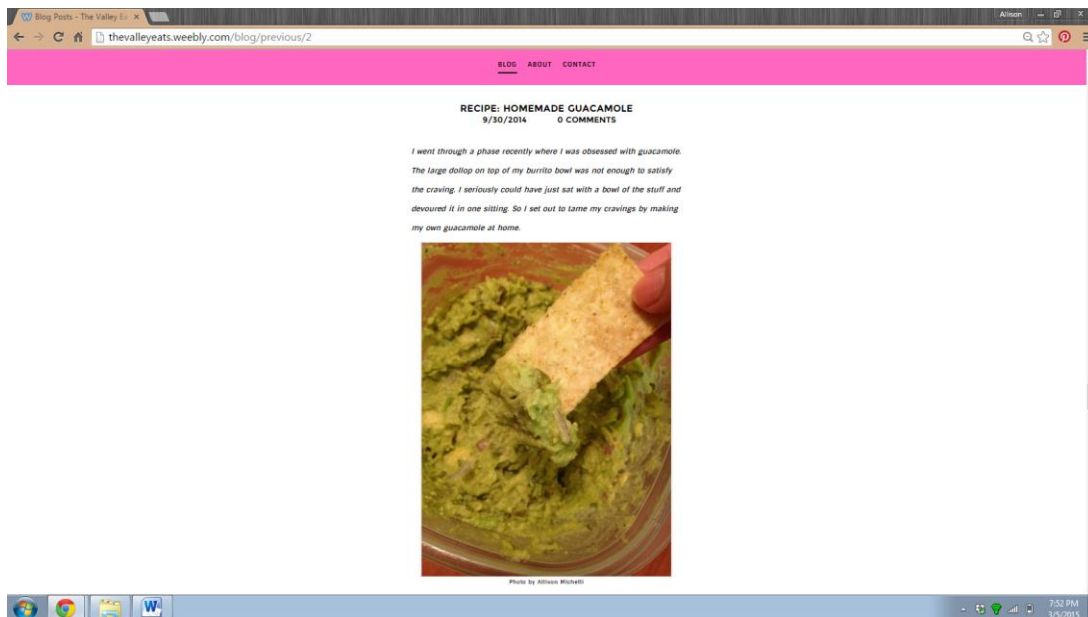


Figure 3

A [recipe tutorial](#) for homemade guacamole.

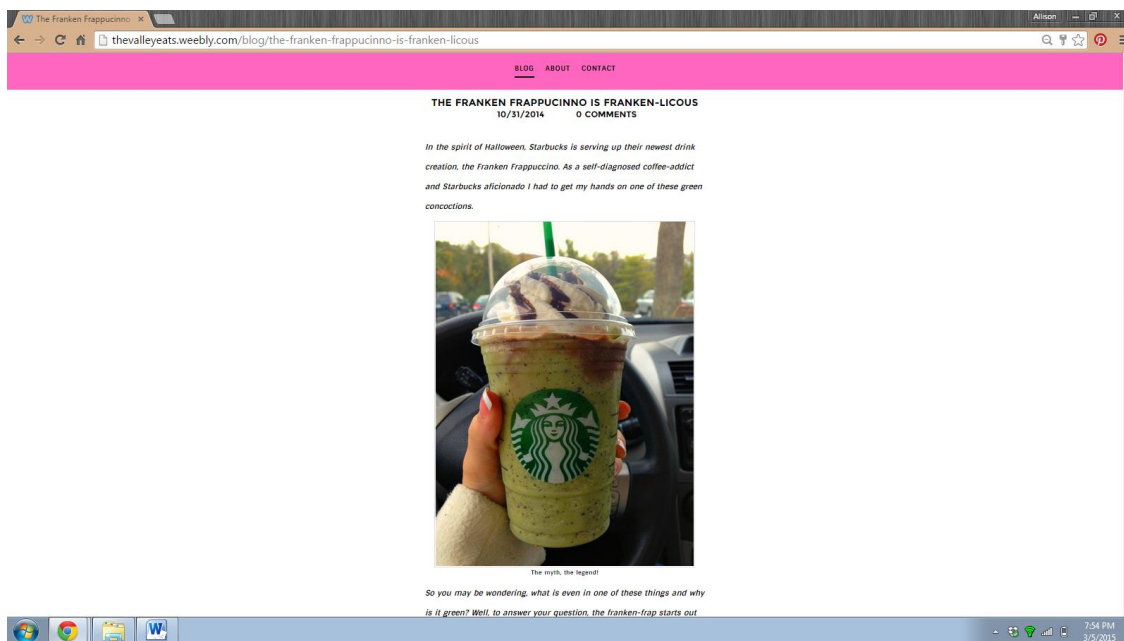


Figure 4

A [foodie find](#) post on my first impression of the Franken-Frappuccinno.

Blog Photography

Photography is a necessary element of food writing whether online and in print. Focusing on food blogging, photography serves an integral purpose because a food blog without pictures is simply just tantalizing descriptions of food. Looking at this concept more generally, when most people flip open a cookbook or a food magazine, they expect there to be pictures. People want to see what a dish is going to look like in its finished form and how to take the steps necessary to get to that finished form. They also want to see pictures of the food at restaurants before they go and spend their own money on it.

The concept of a blog hinges on the idea of giving readers an indulgent experience every time they click onto the site. Photographs add an extra element to the reading experience that words are simply unable to capture. Many full-time bloggers choose to use a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera. For this project, I used my iPhone 5c to take the photos included on my blog. Although I own a DSLR camera, the iPhone seemed like a more accessible and less obtrusive option especially when taking photos in restaurants. The iPhone 5c is equipped with a rear-facing eight-megapixel camera with an aperture of f/2.4 (“iPhone 5c Tech Specs”). I then uploaded to my laptop and organized into folders according to the specific blog post they coordinated to.

An article published by *Condé Nast Traveler Magazine* titled “Food Photography Tips For Instagram and Smartphones” offered some simple tips for taking great food pictures on the iPhone. Lighting is an essential element to photography in general, but in food photography, it is important to “focus on one key light, and try to block other conflicting light sources” as well as to utilize natural lighting as much as possible. The article also recommended playing around with the angle that the pictures are taken from. Changing up the typical overhead angle offers variety and a unique perspective on the dish itself. In order to keep the focus on the food, the article recommends

keeping the overall composition of the shot simple from the color of the dishes used to the surrounding props and backdrop. The goal of food photography is to make the dish look as natural as possible while highlighting its most delicious features.

Recently this foodie pastime garnered much negative press due to the overwhelming popularity and consistency of content being generated. Smartphones and digital cameras have taken which was once a profession and turned it into a mainstream phenomenon and hobby for people. Many chefs and restaurateurs have taken notice of this alarming trend, and in many upscale restaurants, there have been flash bans and even photography bans put into place. Chef David Bouley insists that taking photos of food at the table “totally disrupts the ambience. It is a disaster in terms of momentum, settling into the meal, [and] the great conversation that develops. It is hard to build a memorable evening when flashes are flying every six minutes” (Stapinski). Chef David Chang, the genius mind behind Momofuku in New York City, echoes Chef Bouley’s sentiments by emphasizing, “It’s just food, eat it (Stapinski)”. Chef Chang has taken it so far that he issued a photography ban in his restaurant Momofuku Ko. *Esquire Magazine* published an article around the same time that agreed with Chang and Bouley suggesting that “Cameras and restaurants go together like bananas and Sprite” (Hopper). Although food photography may be seen by many in the culinary world as a faux pas/sacrilege, I find contentment in setting off my flash at the table. In fact, I came to enjoy food photography so much that it has become one of my hobbies.

PicMonkey.com is a photo-editing website that I utilized extensively while completing my summer internship at *Northern Virginia Magazine*. PicMonkey.com allows the user to edit and touch up photos, design layouts, and create collages. The website is free to use, but there is also an option for a “Royale” subscription that gives you more design options and features. I used the basic free option because all I used the website for was cropping and editing my photos for the blog. After

organizing the photos into their respective photos on my desktop, they then went through a 3-step editing process on PicMonkey.com. The purpose of the design process was to ensure consistent image shape and quality throughout the blog.

The first step of the photo editing process was to make all the photos a uniform size. As a rule of thumb, I made all of my photos 550 inches wide with a fixed proportion. This means that when I set the width to 550, it adjusted the height respectively (see Figure 5). In general this made all my photos consistently formatted throughout the blog. The exception was with horizontal photos that came out wider than the vertical photos. Most of the photos that I took though were vertical so this minor irregularity did not bother me. The second step in the editing process was adjusting the sharpness and clarity of the photo. The sharpness setting was 2-3 and the clarity was adjusted to 5-8% (see Figure 6). The sharpness and clarity settings help to smooth out some of the rough edges that iPhone photos sometimes exhibits. If a photo had a slight blurry or grainy quality to it, increasing these settings enhanced the overall clarity of the photo. The third step in the editing process was adjusting the exposure, specifically the brightness and contrast. The brightness setting was adjusted to 5-19 and the contrast setting was adjusted to 8-10 (see Figure 7). The contrast and brightness settings adjusted the lighting and shadows and called attention to the fine details of the photo. The settings in steps two and three are approximate because they depend on the initial quality and lighting of the original photo.

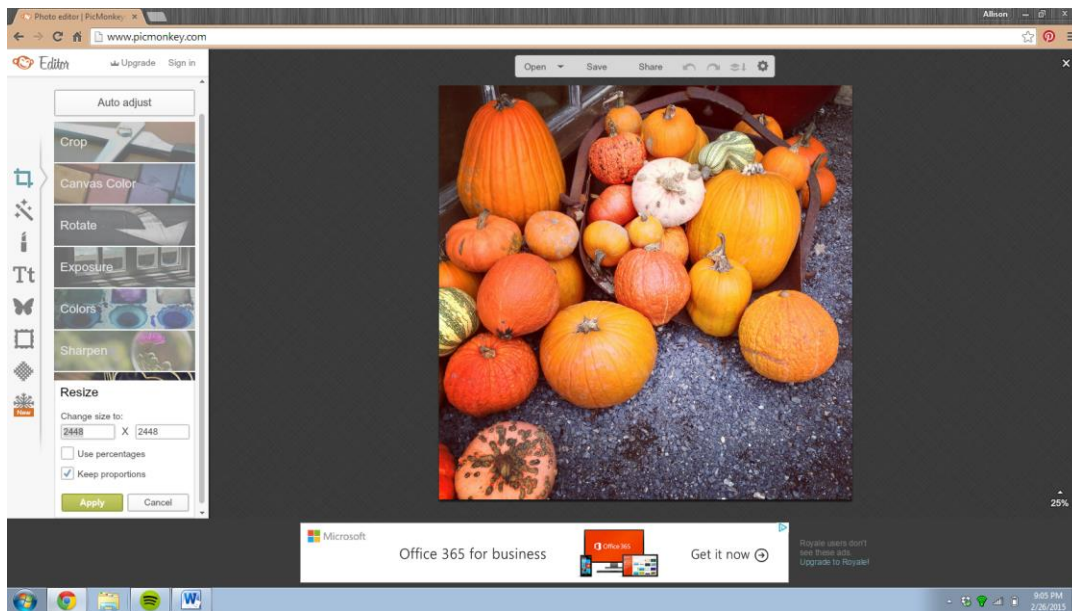


Figure 5

The original photo. No edits have been made.

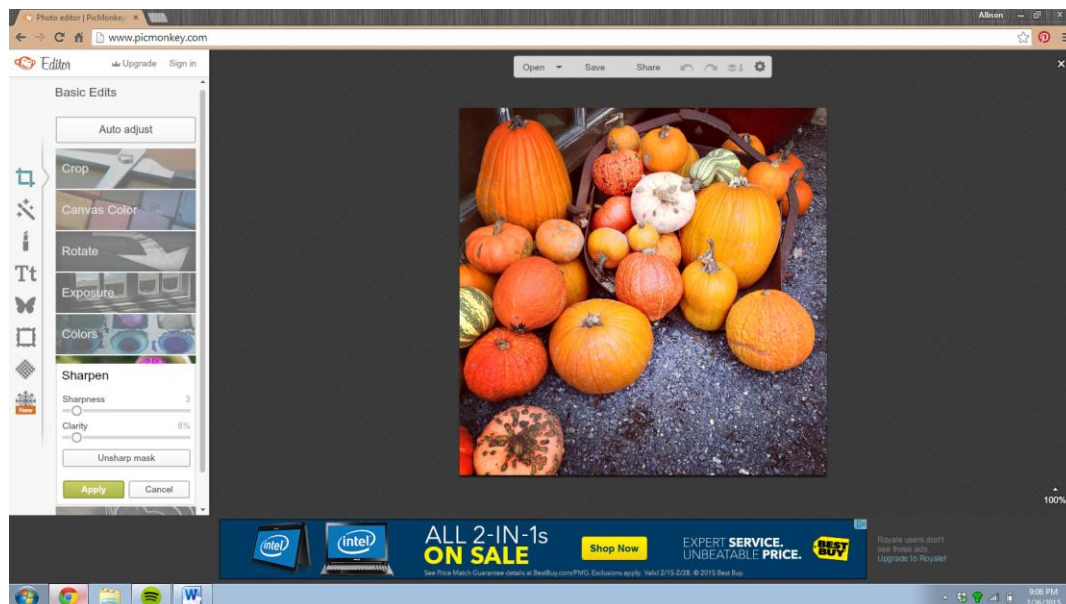


Figure 6

The original photo with a dimension of 550x550. The brightness has been adjusted to 3 and the clarity to 8%.

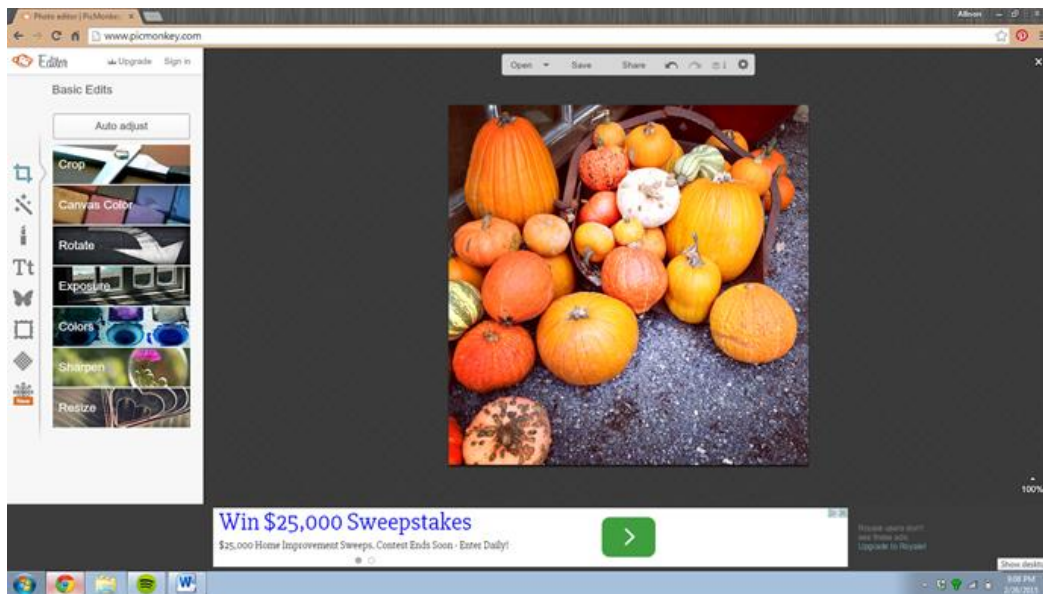


Figure 7

The final edited photo with a brightness of 5 and a contrast of 10.

Reflection

Food is sustenance of the soul. Food contributes to our sense of self: who we are as individuals, where we come from geographically and the culture that makes up our origins. It speaks of our families and our homes. The two parts of this project—a synthesized reflection and the creative blog—produced a third component of the project that I did not quite expect. What I have created with the blog is a chronicle of my senior year through the foods I ate and the restaurants I went to. It is a personal history, a chronicle of my life in one school year.

I rely so much on a campus meal plan that restaurant outings have become touchstones for me—moments I have committed to memory because of the people that surrounded me at the table or the occasion of the restaurant visit like a celebration or a friend's birthday. The foods I cooked in my tiny apartment kitchen were a mini-feast and a celebration of my culinary prowess. This realization goes back to the point that food touches every aspect of our lives. It is an integral part of not only our survival but also our culture and our personal history.

Last year when I was just at the beginning of this experience I have to admit, I was naïve to the rigor and discipline such a project would necessitate. Through all the meals, restaurants, recipes, articles read, moments shared with family and friends, I learned that food blogging is actually an extremely rigorous job. My main challenge throughout the project was relating to my audience and attempting to enliven the experience of eating, cooking, and exploring the food culture of the Shenandoah Valley. This act of re-living the dining experience through my writing was cathartic and heartwarming.

There were various learning curves throughout this project including accommodating for procrastination, creating a consistent blogging schedule, and planning ahead. Audience awareness was also a constant point of contention in my writing, not because I was not considering my readers

enough, but because I was allowing my audience's possible reception or perception of my work to control the honesty of my words. When I first started the blog, I felt compelled to only write positive opinions about what I was eating and the restaurants I was going to, even when there were aspects of the meal or the restaurant that needed improvement. I was not being completely truthful with my writing because of my own fear that someone that read my blog would disagree with my negative opinion or perceive me to be an unhappy person. It was not until the second semester that I finally was able to summon the courage to convey what I wanted to say in an honest voice. People do not always want to read a critic's work that is praiseworthy of everything. Once in a while, a harsh criticism is interesting and shows that the critic has a set of rigid standards that they abide by.

Editing blog posts was a large part of the maintenance of the blog. I made a rule at the beginning of this project that once a post was uploaded to the web, then it would be philosophically impossible to act in a recursive way and change any mistakes that had been initially overlooked in the editing process. My reasoning behind this editing philosophy was that once something is published to the internet, it technically can never be changed because even if the editor goes back and corrects the mistake, the original version is still available for reading somewhere on the internet. My second reason for not making edits post-publication was to capture the essence of the moment that the posts were written in. If this blog was going to be a true reflection of my time as a food blogger, then it needed to appear so. Creating a polished piece with little to no grammar or punctuation errors was always my prime goal, but there may be instances throughout the blog where I inadvertently overlooked certain errors. This philosophy in no way reflects carelessness or a lack of effort on my part, but instead captures a genuine moment in time when each individual blog post was created.

Looking back through my blog posts, I am reminded of the luxurious privilege that I have to explore this genre of writing. Currently there 49.1 million Americans suffer from food insecurity (Hunger and Poverty Fact Sheet), 144,480 of those people living right here in the Shenandoah Valley (Map the Meal Gap). What I get to do is a luxury and a privilege. I am thankful that I never have to worry about where my next meal is coming from and that I always go to bed with a full stomach. It is our responsibility not only as consumers of food but as human beings to make responsible decisions when it comes to our meals and the restaurants where we choose to eat. If food has the power to influence so much of our personal identities and geographical cultures, then it ultimately has the power to change the world starting at the kitchen tables within our communities.

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